Research Pods: Breaking down Barriers, Demystifying Research for Social Work Students and Practitioners in the Practice Setting

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ABSTRACT

Demystifying research for social work students and practitioners in practice is a necessary, and challenging, proposition for social work educators. Research pods have been established by the University of Auckland to facilitate integration of placements with continuous research opportunities for students and practitioners. The research pod concept in partnership with community social service organisations offers opportunities to robustly examine areas of practice significant to service development and research competence. The student's research work is augmented alongside their daily connection with clients on placement, assisting the dual purpose of exploration and evaluation for organisations and research learning "by doing".

This study explores perspectives of students, practitioners and tertiary providers in the research pod partnerships. The following discourse represents the treasures uncovered from eight interviews with these stakeholders which focused on the research pods journey. Key findings include the strengths of research partnerships, the potential barriers to the sustainability of research pods, and development of future research pods towards enrichment of services for clients. Implications arising from this study reinforce the need to continue to develop a social work research culture and collaboration with key stakeholders in evidence based practice in the social services field.

Keywords: *Field placements; Research communities; Social work education; Research pods*

INTRODUCTION

Evidence based practice (EBP) in social work promotes carefully considered decision-making by practitioners based on information relating to interventions with service users (Plath, 2006). The push for EBP, both as a means of providing quality service to users and furnishing proof of effectiveness for funders, has stimulated a way forward for the social work profession to develop its own research culture personality (Beddoe et al., 2006). The development of a strong research culture allows social work to stand alongside other professions, to grow its professional knowledge base and contribute to the ongoing professionalisation of social work (Beddoe, 2011).

Historically, there have been tensions in relation to social work research being positioned alongside practice, as research has often been viewed as something to be kept separate and at a distance. Within social work education, the importance of EBP commands ongoing attention and rigour within social work programmes. The field-placement component offers a wonderful opportunity for students and their field educators to integrate research within their practice learning.

This article describes the process of establishing and supporting 'research pods' undertaken by the university practice learning team and community organisations. Research pods are a co-constructed partnership between the University of Auckland and community social service organisations. The focus of the research pods was to offer a relational research approach between social work educators and professionals to improve effective service delivery for service users and facilitate ongoing research placements for students partici-pating in the social work programmes. Specifically, each research pod consisted of the field educator and the student with support from the practice learning team, a university research advocate and the organisation's chief executive officer (CEO). The pods were established between the university and community organisations to bring together an organisation's need for further research on their services with the student's practice learning needs whilst on placement. The research pods were unique in that the student had the opp-ortunity to engage equally with research development and practice in an organisation. One student was placed in each pod for their placement duration. Ethical approval was sought between the university, each organisation's CEO and respective board members, prior to the commencement of a research pod. The findings discussed within this study relate to the establishment of two research pods in different community organisations. The study builds upon a "growing research in practice" (GRIP) model (Lunt, Fouché, & Yates, 2008) and draws upon recent learning from colleagues who piloted a collaborative research project in the social services field (Maidment, Chilvers, Crichton-Hill, & Meadows-Taurua, 2011).

The project focused on engaging Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work (Professional) qualifying students in applied research in the social services field. Students were identified on the criteria of their level of interest in a field of practice and previous academic success and were then given the option to participate in a research pod place-ment by the practice learning team. Field placements for students varied between 10 and 13 weeks (depending on the cohort). An agreement between the university and community service organisations ensured the research project comprised half of the student's placement time, and the design and implementation of each research project was undertaken

sequentially from one placement to the next. Each student participated in a pre-arranged aspect of the research project that was completed within their placement duration.

The university practice learning team and the academic staff advocate support were committed to the notion of embedding practitioner and student research in social work practice. Through research pods we uncovered a way of connecting the growing expectations for research-qualified practitioners with the practice community's front-line needs and demands. We aspired to influence and shape student and practitioner views of research as a worthwhile, creative, enjoyable and critically reflective process that ultimately enhances understanding of client wellbeing. The co-constructed partnership with organisations enabled a flexible, paced research process, emphasising strong, on-going relationships, exploration and detailed planning. With these elements combined, the research process was demystified and the confidence and understanding of research for social work students, practitioners and their agencies was increased.

Our findings reinforced the importance of a tripartite vision: to enable students to have an awareness of research; to appraise research evidence; and to ensure that all future social workers have an understanding of research methods, strategies and skills (Macintyre & Paul, 2013). The process of gathering the perspectives of contributing groups (key informants, field educators/practitioners and students) provided interesting insights and enabled us to distil important factors that have contributed to growing our own ways of engaging with social work research knowledge. While consciously using field placements to advance and enrich our social work research philosophy, the authors conclude by identifying significant markers for the way ahead and "where to next?" for developments in the social work research field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social work as a profession is ever-changing, thus it is a challenge for those who teach and who practise social work, to keep up with the demands and requirements of the profession. McLaughlin (2011) argues that the social work future will need research-minded practitioners to debate and prove the effectiveness of practice, demonstrate government impact and to advocate for vulnerable populations. Within social work, there has been recognition for interventions to be evidence based using research projects, to improve the quality of practice (Maidment et al., 2011). Research creates a platform for evidence-based social work, and contributes to effective and reflexive practitioners. It is recognised globally that the integration of research into practice as part of practitioners' ethical responsibilities is required, not least because engagement in research-informed practice demonstrates competency (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2015; Social Workers Registration Board, 2016).

Many social work programmes have integrated research into practice by adopting EBP as a focus for their curriculum. The teaching of EBP allows for an objective analysis by students and practitioners of how research studies, theories or models of practice integrate with practice and the improvement of quality service provision (Wells, Maschi, & Slater, 2012). In order to be critical, students must be taught methods of research and ways to infuse research into practice. In addition, EBP occurs within frameworks of ethical and pragmatic social work reasoning and allows social workers to use empirically tested knowledge that assists with

maintaining ethical standards (Beddoe et al., 2006) thereby allowing critical inquiry and research to occur, facilitating a practitioner's work.

Hardcastle and Bisman (2003) highlight three models of social work research: The "Educated Consumer of Research", "Practitioner Scientist" and "Research as Practice Methodology" model. The Research as Practice Methodology model argues that research knowledge and skills are to support good social work and that research needs to form part of everyday practice knowledge. This model, in our opinion, forms the basis for EBP and the practitioner's ability to develop and evaluate their services. Exploring the literature has highlighted some clear themes of bringing research and practice together, barriers and challenges to this task and the critical importance of building research structures within social work and social work education.

Bringing research and practice together

For good social work to take place, research practice needs to be at the centre of social work (Beddoe et al., 2006). Research-informed practitioners are better equipped to respond when confronted with a range of issues compared with practitioners who are not research-minded (Fouché & Lunt, 2010). In order to develop a social work research culture, Orme and Powell (2008) claim that one cannot simply "undertake more research" but that it is about epistemological coherence within social work practice (p. 990). Thus, developing a research culture requires the incorporation of both an educational and practice-focused research curriculum; the field placement potentially offers an ideal place for this to occur.

In developing social work research within practice, there are several systemic issues to be considered. From an educational perspective, social work students need appropriate training so that, post-qualifying, they have transferable skills that filter through into the workforce (Orme & Powell, 2008). Social work educators need to be competent in, and focussed on, teaching research, developing a research-minded culture through the support of research-based practitioners.

To ensure that the research is a focal part of the social work curriculum and what is taught is of value and interest to students, their voices need to be heard and their diverse perspectives taken into consideration. In Gibbs' (2012) study, students were asked about their views on research and its importance to social work. They emphasised the importance of making use of reflective methods as well as the importance of working in collaboration with agencies and service providers. The students identified two main groups or approaches into which research can be placed. Firstly, small-scale, everyday research that can be undertaken by practitioners and secondly, large-scale research undertaken by professional researchers. Significantly, it was identified that there will always be barriers that need to be overcome (time, finances and organisational support) in order to effectively incorporate research into practice. The students also highlighted that it is necessary for social work research to be linked with social work values and beliefs (Gibbs, 2012). Therefore, in order for research courses to be effective, they need to address micro, meso and macro social work problems, and students need to be well taught, guided, assisted and challenged on their journey. It is important that there is an incorporation of EBP and, lastly, both research and practice courses must address methods of evaluation of practice (Drisko, 2014).

Barriers and challenges

The teaching of research however, is not a straightforward, linear concept. Over the years there has been tension between social work practice and social work research. Identified barriers to research informing practice have included: research complicating practitioner action and outcome; complexities in research literacy and education; and practitioner and student reluctance to engage in research (Gibbs & Stirling, 2013; McLaughlin, 2011). Cameron and Este (2008) identified these barriers as a result of social workers favouring practice knowledge over that of social work research. There has, historically, always been tension between caring and science, with practice focusing on service delivery whilst research focuses on the creation and testing of knowledge.

Considerable time needs to be taken to acquire knowledge, skills and confidence for the social worker to be research-minded and to have sound practice (Beddoe, 2011). However useful it might be, many practitioners still view research as distant from practice. An awareness of these perceptions of research within social work practice led to the creation of the GRIP model (Beddoe et al., 2006; Lunt et al., 2008). As a result, many factors need to be considered when creating research-based placements for students. Within social work education, there are barriers to be overcome in order to develop a research-minded social work generation (Fouché & Bartley, 2016). Cameron and Este (2008) state that there is a great challenge to overcome student fears and anxiety about research. This is most likely a fear of the unknown, resulting in barriers which prevent students from gaining knowledge and developing their research skills (Cameron & Este, 2008). Maidment et al. (2011) found careful matching of students to research topics is essential. The level of student enthusiasm needs to be gauged in advance as the research topic will feature as part of their placement experience. A research environment also needs to be established within host organisations to address, not only the practical necessities for the students—computer, internet and work space— but to ensure a supportive, research-friendly environment (Hewson, Walsh, & Bradshaw, 2010). Clarification of the focus and objectives of the research project is needed in order for students to know what is expected of them with adequate time allowance to complete their research tasks. Strategic networking is an essential part of the research process, as it allows students to connect with resources and people outside of the organisation, and linking with other students engaged in research to ensure its relevance and applicability (Maidment et al., 2012). Lastly, research tasks need to be connected to the placement assessments, as the research activities need to be closely associated with all other required tasks for the purpose of ensuring a holistic research placement (Hewson et al., 2010).

Building research structures

Social work requires strategic attention to the area of collaborative partnerships between social work organisations and tertiary institutions in order to build a research-minded culture. In considering the concept of research pods, the team drew upon Etienne Wenger's work with communities of practice (CoPs). Wenger defines CoPs as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2006. p. 1). The development of CoPs is a strategy to bring about change through the establishment of core professional groups for collaborative learning and growth. CoPs invite the creation of connections to facilitate the harnessing of knowledge towards innovative problem-solving opportunities. Additionally, CoPs encourage collaboration on a

project, such as the strategic development of research education within practice as each party involved brings unique key skills, knowledge and world views that will, arguably, result in the growth and development of a successful research-based field education programme. The effective implementation of research rests with organisational leadership, management and the fostering of a research-minded organisational culture (Beddoe et al., 2006; Orme & Powell, 2008).

Developing research structures between social work organisations and tertiary institutions provides opportunities for mentoring and developing networks. Mentoring can provide all parties involved with social and emotional support, as well as enhance practitioner skills, enabling professional growth (Hewson et al., 2010). Mentoring has two great advantages: increased communication through the development of a network between colleagues; and the breaking down of barriers between the university research focus and the practice community. Networking allows for greater team cohesion resulting in clarity and consistency of social work practice (Fouché & Lunt, 2010). It was with this in mind that mentoring formed a key part of the GRIP programme, providing necessary learning and support for all parties involved (Beddoe et al., 2006).

For research within the field of social work to develop and succeed, these issues of infrastructure and quality of research education must be addressed. Strategic decisions need to be made over *what* is being taught as well as *why* and *by whom* (Orme & Powell, 2008).

In order for a strong research culture to develop in social work, reflection and collaboration between students, organisations and all parties towards practice-orientated research aimed at improving social work practice and client outcomes need to be established (Beddoe & Harington, 2012). Historical negative research experiences must be critically analysed and addressed to ensure future success of creating research-minded social workers. Understanding social work research can make a positive difference and can result in the creation of a research-minded social work generation (Gibbs & Stirling, 2013). Building research capacity ensures evidence for best practice and high quality services (Orme & Powell, 2008).

The collaboration of students, practitioners, academics, organisations and funding bodies will allow for the development of a research culture within Aotearoa New Zealand social work schools and social work organisations. It was with this in mind that the research pods within social work field placements were pursued.

METHODOLOGY

As a practice learning team, we adopted social constructionism as our epistemological stance (Crotty, 1998) in exploring perspectives and narratives from different stakeholder groups in the field-placement process. Qualitative case studies are used as the methodological approach to analyse and describe participant perspectives on the establishment and servicing of the research pods (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Examination of the research pod collaborations and their learning was undertaken to provide solutions for EBP within community agencies, to discover the outcomes of establishing the pods, and the prospects for consistent, ongoing field placement opportunities.

The research pods involved practitioners in community organisations identifying a research project of value that required further research within their organisation, after gaining management support and board approval. Students were matched to the agency via interest and ability and were given an overview of the project. Each student was allocated sequential research tasks to complete with assistance from the practice learning team or research advocate from the university. This permitted the field educator to focus primarily on the performance of the student on placement and to ensure their practice learning goals were achieved.

In the small study, eight participants were individually interviewed (three key informants, two field educators and three students). The research advocate was not chosen as a participant due to their dual relationship to the student and to field educators in this study. The key informants were social work educators from across Aotearoa New Zealand who teach, have published extensively on research in social work and have a commitment to promoting social work research. The two field educators were social work practitioners employed by the community organisation with responsibility for regular supervision and daily oversight of the student's placement. All three students interviewed had experienced a 10 to 13-week field placement in a research pod where their time was split on placement between exposure to practice and undertaking research.

Ethics approval was obtained from the university's Human Participants Ethics Committee for this research. Consent was also obtained from the Faculty Dean, the Head of School and CEOs of each participating organisation to approach participants relating to this study. The key informants, field educators and students responded to a participant information sheet and gave their signed consent to participate in the study. Due to the small sample size and the number of active research pods, participants were all known by the researchers (members of the practice learning team). However, as the research was seen as project work it did not receive a mark or have a specific assessment attached to it which avoided a conflict of interest for the practice learning team.

The researchers were interested in the perspectives of the partners and the semi-structured questions for each group were the same and related to their perception of research pods, strengths, barriers, pacing of research pods over time, benefits to service users and contribution to research competence. Individual interviews were audio-recorded and facilitated by one of the researchers and transcribed. Pseudonyms were assigned and identifying information removed to protect participant and agency confidentiality. The transcribed data were explored by all members of the team using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Three main themes emerged: strengths of the research pods; barriers and challenges encountered; and further development of research pods.

FINDINGS

Strengths of research pods

The participants identified several advantages of participating in research pod partnerships for all involved. From their participation, students developed a wider appreciation of the value of research. Participating in a research pod as part of the placement experience

promotes transfer of learning, connecting theory in the classroom, to practice research undertaken in the context of a community organisation.

Students had time to learn how their agency functioned, to be pro-active in their work with key organisational staff and develop intimate knowledge of the service provided for service users.

I saw the advantage of research being conducted within agencies … I had to read up and talk with the people at the organisation, find out what they wanted to see from it … how it could help the agency themselves, [and] the work they do. (Lucy)

The valuing of relationships and partnerships between the university and the community agency was essential to the research pod success. The academic support and resources at the university assisted in establishing and maintaining the research pod, whereas the staff at the agency could provide practical knowledge of the agency and the practice undertaken. Both were essential ingredients for the success of the project. The research advocate also met with one of the students on placement regularly to ensure they were meeting the research goals for the agency.

The university research advocate kept in contact with me. We met 3 or 4 times over placement… You want to know that what you are doing is right for the research, [and] you are on track. (Rachel)

A key strength of developing research partnerships was the importance students ascribed to their role in assisting experienced practitioners to develop EBP thereby increasing the value of their practice in the agency. Lucy commented that practitioners "would not have the time to conduct [research] themselves" and that was important in demonstrating the value of the work undertaken at the community organisation. In addition, students began to articulate the importance of research to ensure funding accountability and links to government providers.

A lot of the funding comes from contracts with [statutory] providers and lottery grants just to keep afloat… it's really daunting. How do you know you've got a job next year? The research partnership can only improve that and give them [government providers] a better idea of what is working. So they [community agencies] can prove to funders that it's working. (Rachel)

Field educators saw strengths in having students and partnering with the university in research pods to provide a fresh perspective to the agency's work. The support of the research advocate and practice learning team to ensure the research pod was successful also assisted the field educator to maintain their role with the student.

It's really neat watching the pieces get completed, the questions the students have come up with and the summary of the findings. (Katy)

[The university research advocate] was helpful. Anything to do with the research, I could speak to him about that. (Joe)

Key informants were excited about how their growing research within organisations can benefit practice and service delivery. This included the realisation of having a longer-term understanding of what research can do towards influencing others, promoting their programmes and deepening professional practice through the application of practice-informed evidence.

People get 'research minded' – [a sense of] what information can do for them, how they can better improve their services, their understanding of their client's world and how they serve that need. But they also start working together in how they capture that information. There's a change to the agency's processes, [and] how teams work together. (Margaret)

The students who participated could identify the positive contribution that the research was making to service users. For the research Rachel was involved in, the results were helpful in developing a programme for teenagers in relation to anti-social behaviour:

It will be interesting to see whether the kids are receptive and if they've taken it back home and not responding to bullies in the way they were … getting more of a programme that is tailored to … their needs. Hopefully [the programme will] change some of the behaviours and increase good ones. (Rachel)

Lucy agreed that the research provided the opportunity to improve the parenting programmes that she was involved in with young mothers and that it empowered service users to provide feedback on the service:

Ultimately the goals of the research are to benefit the service and … giving the service users the chance to give their voice … that should benefit mums … and shape things to suit them [to] make it a better experience. (Lucy)

The research conducted within the agencies also provided opportunities for the social workers to re-evaluate their own role with service users and the effectiveness of the service:

I think it will be good that my supervisor will get an idea that what he is doing is actually working... He can improve in what he's doing now… so it's beneficial for the service users. (Rachel)

Once the whole research is done the results will show … the effectiveness of their programmes and the direct impact will go to the service users. (Susan)

The attitudes of the students involved in the research pods and the process of working alongside the service users has proven to be a positive experience both for those who participated, and for the service. Joe observed:

The [young people] that the students worked with over the years have benefited … There's no doubt they're impacting on the agency in … service delivery and professionalism … They have a zeal and passion … they are adding to that vibrancy and want to save the world.

The benefits for service users and their development in the local community are central aims of research projects. Research is able to provide evidence to support extending existing services and develop targeted resources to existing organisations and support groups:

It's a no-brainer … you need evidence to say that I am making a difference … take it to the people … So it's more than just lip service about including service users, it's about doing it in a way that has integrity. (Margaret, key informant)

Barriers and challenges

The students encountered difficulties participating in the research pods. Our study confirmed that the initial thoughts and feelings experienced by students undertaking their placement in a research pod were of apprehension and nervousness. These feelings were fuelled by their lack of belief in their competence to complete the research tasks for the organisation.

I was a little nervous because this was an important thing for the organisation. What if I stuff it up? (Rachel)

The common perception about research in social work being "academic" and conducted in an environment away from an organisational context was also raised by students in their initial anxieties. This perception of research being "done to" by others enforces the research–practice divide (Gibbs & Stirling, 2013; McLaughlin, 2011). One student commented:

… [M]y perceptions of [research] were more of an academic aspect of social work [conducted] separately … I wouldn't have thought of it as something that is conducted in agencies, due to the limited time and resources. (Lucy)

The issue of time to complete research tasks was a central factor for students whilst on placement and rigorous planning was required. Lucy commented that her placement was "10 weeks; [the previous student's] was 12 weeks" and found "the time constraint a bit of a challenge." Other students felt that the handover from one student to another may also slow down the research process. This slowing down may lead to new students, participants and the field educator feeling disjointed in the research process at the commencement of each placement. A dedicated field educator on placement is ideally required to keep the links alive throughout the research process:

If you have someone there from the start and can go all the way through, [it] means that they can understand what is to be achieved. If you are having new placements coming though, you have to explain the process [and the history] to them … and what's going to happen. (Rachel)

Frequently the service users of the organisation and the students built a solid working relationship. A disadvantage identified in the use of research pods was that the work with participants in the research would become fractured between successive students:

The participants will get to know your face and what you are there to do. If you have a new person every few months – what's going on? (Rachel)

You've got the issue of that student establishing relationships with those participants and earning their trust then handing it over. (Lucy)

The associated challenges that field educators face to ensure that the research pods are successful relate to the dedicated space that they can give to oversee the research pod. From the organisation's perspective, field educators felt some apprehension and reluctance to becoming involved in research as a part of their practice. Joe was concerned that he did not have this expertise particularly "going through the paperwork side of things". Katy also commented on "the confidence to do it while in a full time employment position".

For Katy, the challenge was "having the capacity" to continue to supervise each student on practicum and had anxieties over whether research would indeed show the benefits the service brought to service users. Joe also refers to the cost of time:

Until you see the product come out the other side, the cost/benefit is hard to imagine ... With all the time you have to put in, you hope that the outcome here is going to add value to [your] existing contracts.

Time is not a constraining factor only for practitioners, field educators and the organisation itself. Margaret (key informant) identified the time and commitment required from academics to support the student and the organisation to succeed with the research project:

They will need to have workshops, support, mentoring, and that's a big barrier for me … making sure that agencies are supported to support our students.

Given the amount of time that elapses over a research project, the changing of key personnel involved in each research pod creates uncertainty and loss of momentum:

For the duration of GRIP we had so many people come and go in agencies that we thought some of the projects were going to fall over ... a real problem in our agencies is the high staff turnaround. You build capacity and then the person who is driving it all leaves. (Margaret)

Key informants, like Margaret, shared their experience that "people are scared of research; they are reluctant to engage [with it]." Whilst another key informant noted that, at the same time:

[O]rganisations are seeing an increasing need for high quality research... In terms of really being able to show accountability to funders, demonstrate the effectiveness of their programmes and to justify the[ir] continuance to management and boards. (Sophie)

Similar to the field educator statements above, a lack of confidence and opportunity, as opposed to a lack of willingness, were identified as barriers for organisations to engage with their practitioners in research. In relation to overcoming such apprehension, Sophie believed in the need to:

[R]e-conceptualise research as being part of your practice tool kit that it's another way of advocating, another way of enabling marginalized voices to be heard and advocating.

Another barrier in the development of research-based placements was the different understanding the organisations have of the project and the outcomes they wish to see over a period of time. Vital to successful research is the motivation of managers in an organisation to develop and promote research. As Nadyne states, *if we didn't have that management buy-in, then it was much harder for people to get the time to come to the workshop days.*

Often, an organisation is uncertain of the research themselves and, in the key informants' view, attempts to use research undertaken to meet short-sighted funding outcomes. Margaret describes most organisations' use of research as:

[A] reactive wish-list of things they can get done so they can get more funding. That's why I say I want them to tie it to their strategic plan. So in five years you want to be 'there' – how are you going to get there and what is the evidence you need to back it up? When they have that sort of vision … I think that makes for a fantastic placement for a student.

Developing future research pods

Instrumental to the future success of research pods are the ongoing relationships, communication, and clarity of role needed from all parties involved. Students felt that the establishment of further research pods and the building upon the initial stages of research projects require key stable relationships and clear, collaborative roles between the organisation and university:

It was good that the university research advocate was there regularly. Also having my supervisor, who wasn't a researcher, but [who] was there to help with practical based things. Then the Practicum team was anything to do with things going on in placement… Each of them had a different role in the placement. (Rachel)

The area of partnership is vital to the development of research pods between the universities and organisations. Solutions to how research pods could be maintained and developed further remain critical. Nadyne, a key informant, reflected on the collective responsibility people can have as research gains momentum:

One thing that worked really well with GRIP was the social engagement with people and the mentoring. So the mentors would meet with the groups …to get some knowledge … [and] people talking amongst themselves. The teams that worked were the ones that developed that really kind of team approach.

Continuing to build relationships between field educators, organisations and staff in tertiary institutions also builds practitioner confidence and knowledge around research. As a social work educator, Sophie felt that:

We need to work on preparing field educators to feel more confident about their supervision of students in conducting research. We need to help field educators to demystify research so it's not an ivory tower thing … It's not a theoretically dense undertaking that puts the students off.

The relationships between academic staff, organisations and field educators hold a collective responsibility to develop social work research for the wellbeing of the profession and to ensure it meets the needs of service users.

The long-term future of research pods as part of a suite of placement opportunities and the associated development of research in organisations holds huge potential. What is apparent is attention focused on building capacity for learning in organisations. Margaret identified how this needed to occur at multiple levels within the organisation:

We need to work with managers to help them develop learning organisations; develop evaluation plans and logic models that will enable them to help their staff conceptualise what research is. I think social work has an immense capacity! … it's about working it from the top down and the bottom up [for] different needs and capacities.

DISCUSSION

Research is a creative process stimulated by human curiosity and a drive for improvement. While, in the past, social work has drawn from models better suited to the medico–science setting, EBP is developing its own personality, shaping the parameters into a more relational and applicable approach that is "purpose fit". Beddoe and Harington (2012) emphasise that "practitioner research is about inquiring into practice with a view to service improvement" (p. 87).

The establishment of research pods contributes to this story which encompasses a range of approaches to capturing and sharing practice-based activity. This niche involvement strengthens partnerships between tertiary institutions and organisations, assists with integrating research education for the student while stimulating the research process for the practitioner. Research pods aid social work educators with the identification of research placement opportunities for students. The GRIP project identified social work educators as key in the mentoring of research communities (Beddoe et al., 2006). The support from academic staff as research advocates was invaluable towards the pods' success and amplifies the practice voice of social work educators (see Figure 1).
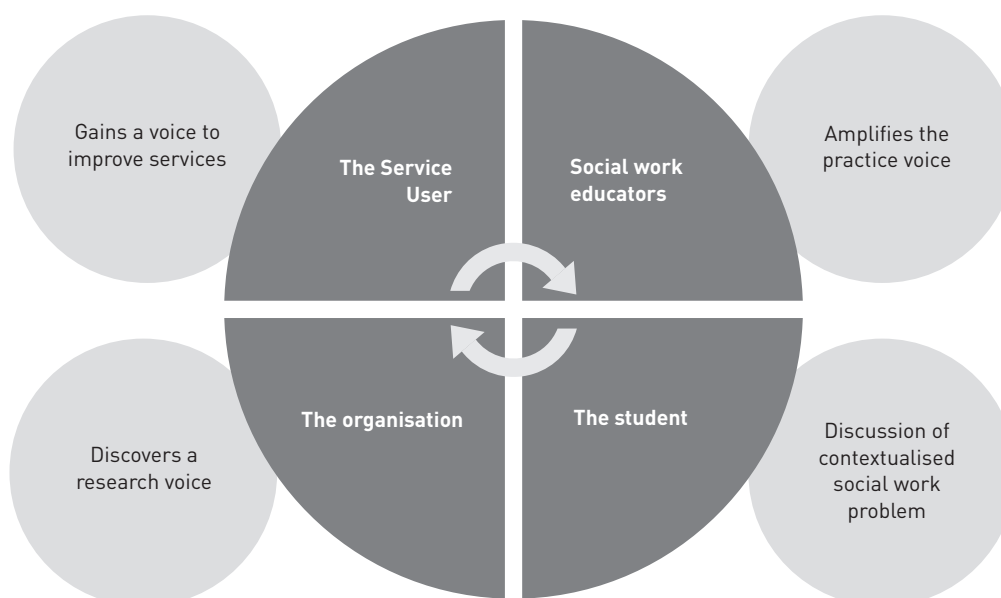
Figure 1. The benefits of research pod partnerships

For students, they are able to develop their awareness of EBP and have an important role in their practicum experience to assist the organisation with their decision-making towards good practice for service users. Field educators and agencies discover the importance of EBP informing practice and how students can support the research process. Finally, the improvement of interventions and programmes in organisations through agency research and the evaluation of its services benefits the service user long term.

The findings of this small, exploratory study indicate that there is a place for student input in developmental research pods. Our experience gave us cause for reflection as we considered the current business model that drives evidence of fiscal viability from contracted community social service organisations. Research driven by business agendas attracts the support of managers to ensure organisations' survival into the future. We believe research that maintains a community organisation's viability does not capture the holistic sense of the practice work undertaken and the value of this towards building collaborative relationships with service users. We question if funding expectations and the more rigorous evaluative macro studies providing outcome evidence for funders could affect the integrity of social work research projects. We wonder if smaller, relationship-based models like research pods can offer a more relational and authentic response to effective service delivery?

Limitations and implications

Innovative models such as GRIP have identified the importance of early management input and support for research partnerships in organisations; shared ownership; the need for all-inclusive collaborative efforts; and the constant battle for research time amongst workload pressures (Beddoe & Harington, 2012). Our findings in this small study affirmed that these were all factors experienced by participants in the research pods and will be a major consideration for the future planning, implementation and sustainability of future research pods.

All student participants reflected a gain in research understanding as a result of their involvement with the pods; given their early and limited understanding of research methods, it was most useful to have the mentorship of the research advocate. In our study this was possible in a dedicated form for only one pod due to time and workload demands. Ideally this contribution should be negotiated as part of the initial set-up of each research pod. Another challenge is the selection and matching of students and their confidence and preparedness around understanding research methods and EBP prior to placement (Gibbs 2012). Finally, the criticality of ensuring the service user can directly engage with the organisation's research and evaluation of its services for the purpose of improving interventions and programmes needs addressing. We believe that engaging the service user in future research opportunities whilst necessitating careful consideration as to the ethical implications is an essential ingredient that is missing at present (see Figure 1).

The micro focus of the research pod involving students on site can offer a flexible framework enabling practitioners to work in closer proximity to service users. Being embedded in the organisation on placement and actively part of the service delivery allows the student to identify and amplify the voice of the service user and ensure that service improvements reflect the concerns of those who matter most. In order to scaffold that learning and ensure that the partnerships are primed for success, the investment of research mentoring from the tertiary institution is necessary.

CONCLUSION

Our findings indicate the benefits the field placement research pod approach has to service users, students, practitioners, their organisations and the university. Positive partnerships between universities and community organisations remain vital to breaking down research barriers for social work practitioners and students. For organisations, building capacity for social work research strengthens effectiveness of practice and promotes learning. For social work educators, the challenge of demystifying research for their students can be further supported and unravelled. If the identified improvements can be regularly actioned, the aim of providing quality research training for the student, nurtured and developed in a real practice setting becomes a reality rather than an aspiration. Participation within research pods can help equip the new generation of social workers with research expectations, skills and competence; concurrently building social work's EBP, professional standing and voice.

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